

# **VIRGINIA COMMISSION ON YOUTH**

## **Study of Truancy and School Dropout Prevention Advisory Group Meeting**

General Assembly Building  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor East Conference Room  
April 20, 2009  
10:00 a.m.

### **MINUTES**

#### **Attending:**

Jean Bankos, William Boshier, Cynthia Cave, Katherine Farmer, Sarah Geddes, Ingrid Grant, Tracey Jenkins, Robley Jones, Asia Jones, Patrick Lacy, Bet Neale, Ingrid Grant, Anthony Roper, Brenda Philpin for Robert Tally, Kristi Wright for Lelia Hopper, Otissa Williams

#### **Attending Electronically:**

Rita Bishop, Asia Jones

#### **Monitored:**

William Butler

#### **Absent:**

Delegates William Fralin and Robert Brink, Senator Charles Colgan, Judge Joseph Bounds, Suzanne Devlin, Mark Emblidge, Melissa Nehrbass, Tom Shortt, Suzanne Whitehead, Michele Dowdy, Marie Sobers, Jan McKee, Robert Ransome

#### **Staff Attending:**

Amy M. Atkinson and Leah Hamaker

### **I. Welcome and Introductions**

*Amy M. Atkinson, Executive Director*

Ms. Atkinson shared the 2008 Study Recommendations and the Draft Study Plan for Year 2. She informed the Advisory Group that one recommendation, which was adopted during the first year of the study, was to introduce legislation during the 2009 General Assembly session to prohibit the use of suspension and expulsion for truancy (House Bill 1794, Brink). It passed with minimal opposition and will take effect July 1, 2009. Ms. Atkinson asked that the Advisory Group members refer to the Draft Study Plan for Year 2. Comments and suggestions on the Draft Study Plan would be received towards the end of the Advisory Group meeting after the presentations.

### **II. Update on Roanoke City's Overage Academy**

*Dr. Rita Bishop, Superintendent of Roanoke City Schools*

Dr. Bishop gave an overview of Roanoke's Overage Academy, Forest Park. Dr. Bishop stated that this first year has been extremely successful. There are 53 middle school students enrolled and 207 high school student enrolled. There are also an additional 25 high school students who are participating in an evening program at

Forest Park. All of the middle school students have indicated they wish to return for the 2009-2010 school year. Of the high school students, 121 are due to graduate in either June or August and eight of these students will receive a general achievement diploma (GAD). Dr. Bishop stated that they had surpassed their original goal for 100 seniors to graduate.

Dr. Bishop stated that, because of the support received from their community partners, including Delegate Fralin, 44 seniors were given a tour of Virginia Western Community College and a 20 minute interview with college officials. A partnership was also developed between the college and Forest Park, which would allow students to attend at no cost if they resided in Roanoke for at least two years and had attained a 2.0 GPA. Dr. Bishop informed the Advisory Group that some students were pursuing careers in the military and one student had made an extremely positive impression with Navy recruiters.

Dr. Bishop stated that Forest Park was holding a separate prom and graduation ceremony. She reiterated that the support received from the community was crucial to the success of the school. The students attending Forest Park were disenfranchised in their previous school setting therefore this school was adapted to meet these students' needs. Teachers were selected because of their ability to handle students in a positive and respectful way. Training for teachers took place when they were hired and all of the teachers were extremely computer proficient. Plato was the information system utilized by Forest Park.

Questions were raised about the budget for Forest Park. Dr. Bishop stated that the school was funded with \$1 million start-up funding, as well as general fund dollars shifted from the existing budget. An existing elementary school building was repurposed and this was the reason Roanoke was able to create this new school. Another question was how many youth slated to graduate would have dropped out had they not be enrolled at Forest Park. Dr. Bishop stated that all of the students who are graduating would have dropped out. Staff for the Commission will schedule another visit to Forest Park during this final year of the study.

### **III. Virginia's Cohort Report for the Class of 2000**

*Dr. Deborah Jonas, Executive Director for Research and Strategic Planning  
Virginia Department of Education*

Dr. Jonas presented on Virginia's cohort reports which detailed the outcomes for students who entered the ninth grade in 2004 and were scheduled to graduate in the spring of 2008.

Dr. Jonas stated that Virginia On-Time Graduation Rate was 82.1 percent. Of the students in the cohort, 8.7 percent dropped out; 0.4 percent were reported as being on long-term medical or family leave or expelled for one year with the potential of returning to school; and the status of two percent could not be determined. A student whose status is unconfirmed is not counted as a dropout until it is established that he or she is not enrolled in another public or private school or receiving home instruction.

The cohort data revealed that students who repeated grades, attended multiple schools and/or were frequently absent, were more likely to drop out. About fifty-nine percent of the students in the cohort who dropped out repeated at least one grade during high school and 37.4 percent repeated their freshman year. Of the students

who dropped out, 42.2 percent were ninth and tenth graders aged 17 years old or older. In addition, 30.5 percent of the dropouts attended two or more high schools before ending their high school careers, compared with 14.6 percent of the students in the cohort who graduated. Of those students who dropped out, 29.4 percent had attendance rates of less than 80 percent during the year before they exited school, compared with 2.1 percent of the students in the cohort who graduated. Also 65.2 percent of dropouts had attendance rates of less than 80 percent during their final year of school, compared with 3.8 percent of graduates. Fifty-five percent of the dropouts left school before the eleventh grade; 26.9 percent dropped out during the ninth grade; 28 percent dropped out during their sophomore year; 24.4 percent dropped out during the eleventh grade; and 20.7 percent dropped out as seniors.

Dr. Jonas informed the Advisory Group that the cohort reports are disaggregated by student subgroup. She noted that African Americans had a 12.6 percent dropout rate, American Indians had a 13.9 percent dropout rate and disadvantaged students had a 13.5 percent dropout rate. This data was helpful so that the Department and school divisions could establish partnerships to help improve the outcomes for a particular subgroup. For example, the Department was planning to work with Project Hope on finding solutions aimed at increasing graduation rates among the homeless population.

Dr. Jonas stated that this data would be helpful because it enabled school divisions, as well as individual schools, to identify at-risk students and offer services they may need so they could complete school. For example, one school division was surprised to discover that they had a higher than expected number of white females who had dropped out of school. They were planning on employing strategies to ascertain why this was occurring. Currently, four school divisions were assisting the Department in developing early-warning systems which would enable them to target interventions that support students at-risk of dropping out while they were still in school.

One member of the Advisory Group stated that the numbers were actually better than anticipated and, while there was still work to be done, that the positives were amazing. Several states that had also revised their methodologies saw a significant drop in their graduation rates. Moreover, having a 5<sup>th</sup> year graduate included in the cohort was also very important.

A concern was raised that, by focusing on a four year cohort, that there may be less effort to keep students in school beyond their fourth year. The impact of intergenerational poverty on graduation rates was also an issue that would require continued scrutiny.

#### **IV. Regional Activities on Dropout Prevention**

*Dr. Cynthia Cave, Director, Office of Student Services  
Virginia Department of Education*

Dr. Cave discussed the dropout prevention activities that have taken place across the Commonwealth in recent months. The Virginia Dropout Prevention Summit held in Richmond in October of 2008 was the kickoff to the regional summits. Dr. Cave stated that the next statewide event was a *Vision to Practice Institute* scheduled for July 14 to July 16 in Richmond. This Institute will address research and policy issues aimed at increasing the graduation rate.

The Department of Education has provided technical assistance, coordination and staff support to the regional and local summits. However, local school divisions had taken the lead on the planning for these regional events. Various regional summits were taking place across the Commonwealth. Regions 6 and 7 were currently in the planning phases for their summit. Norfolk was hosting a summit entitled *Can You Hear Me Now?* By Christmas, every region would have hosted a summit. A resource being used by the local school divisions and the state was a book published by America's Promise called *Graduation Nation*. Dr. Cave encouraged the Advisory Group members to review this resource, which could be accessed via the Department's website.

Dr. Cave stated that partnerships between schools and communities were key to keeping youth connected to school. Schools cannot combat this issue without receiving support from the community. Best practices, such as tutoring and mentoring, were also important components. Dr. Cave encouraged the members of the Advisory Group to visit the Department's website to view policies and practices that reduce dropout.

## **V. Recent Developments to the Regulations for Standards for Accrediting Public Schools In Virginia**

*Michelle Vucci, Director, Office of Policy, Virginia Department of Education*

Ms. Vucci updated the Advisory Group members on the regulations for Standards of Accrediting public schools in Virginia. Modifications to the Technical Diplomas, the new requirement for a course in economics and personal finance, the Academic and Career Plans and the recent incorporation of graduation rates in Virginia's accountability system were the items Ms. Vucci highlighted in her presentation.

Final changes to accreditation of public school regulations were recently approved by the Board of Education. The requirements for the Standard Technical Diploma and the Advanced Technical Diploma were modified. A major change to these Technical Diplomas is to require one standard credit in economics and personal finance. A student must earn four standard credits in career and technical education in a career concentration for the Standard Technical Diploma. For the Advanced Technical Diploma, the student must earn three standard credits in career and technical education and have the option to take one additional credit in career and technical education or one credit in the arts for the Advanced Diploma. These changes will take effect during the 2010-2011 academic year.

Pursuant to the regulations, all students are to have a personal Academic and Career Plan by the time they complete 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The Academic and Career Plans will then be updated before the student enters 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade. The Plans will include the student's program of study for high school graduation and a postsecondary pathway based on a student's academic and career interest. These plans are to be signed by the parents and will also take effect during the 2010-2011 school year.

The revisions to the regulations also require that graduation rates must be at least 85 percent for full accreditation. Virginia is one of the first states to include graduation rates for accreditation. The state has developed an index and counts students who graduate on time at 100 points. A GED certificate is 75 points. If a student remains in school beyond 4 years, it counts as 70 points, but if that student graduates in the

5<sup>th</sup> year, the score will be 100 points in that 5<sup>th</sup> year. These proposed regulations will be effective fall 2010. There is a five-year phase-in period where schools can be rated as Provisionally Accredited.

The Advisory Group discussed the whether students had to pass the assessment required for the Technical Diploma in order to graduate. Ms. Vucci indicated that, while students were required to take the assessments, they did not have to pass the assessment to graduate. Another member asked whether the Academic and Career Plans were modified when a student was suspended or expelled. Because students who were suspended were still enrolled in school, it was thought that these Plans would still apply to students who were suspended. When students were expelled from school, they were removed from the rolls, so it was thought that the Plans would no longer apply. Short-term and long-term suspension, along with homebound instruction, would not alter the requirements for Academic and Career Plans. Guidelines would be developed by the Department to address this concern. Also, a question was raised about how Academic and Career Plans would be incorporated into the distance learning curriculum. Because students who were distance learners were still enrolled in school, these situations would be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

## **VI. Discussion of Next Steps**

### ***Advisory Group***

The Advisory Group discussed additional topics staff could investigate in the second year of this study. These topics are outlined below.

- Review the issues set forth in House Joint Resolution 706 (Ebbin) which was introduced during the 2009 General Assembly. This resolution established a subcommittee to study ways to increase the graduation rate and, while similar to the Commission's study plan, also addresses various educational systemic issues/barriers.
- Identify those interventions that work to prevent dropout and are cost effective as well as the level of state support necessary to ensure that they are implemented correctly.
- Acknowledge that the dropout problem must be addressed beyond the current cohort; this problem must be addressed at the middle and elementary school levels, as well as best-practices that can be utilized.
- Include elementary school in the picture. Elementary school principals can tell now which students will have problems later. If a student is not reading on grade level by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, this can be a major predictor of future problems. Instruments that can help identify youth at-risk of dropping out without labeling them would be helpful.
- Identify what factors help at-risk youth remain in school. Resiliency factors in these youth and how to cultivate these factors in youth who are in danger of leaving school.
- Acknowledge that a financial commitment at the state level is necessary to address dropout prevention. During re-benchmarking, it is important to address the cost of recommendations. For example, Academic and Career

Plans are an unfunded mandate at the local level. The Commonwealth will need to “kick-in” their fair share for the cost of the study recommendations.

- Investigate how those youth without a caring adult complete school and develop into stable adults. What aspects contribute to these youths’ success? Research the role of buffering adults and mentors.
- Suggest that staff can survey how schools process truancy cases and school divisions’ practices for collecting information on truant youth in their division.
- Acknowledge generational challenges and how to overcome these challenges so youth are more likely to succeed in school and in life.

Ms. Atkinson stated that staff would be contacting the Advisory Group to schedule a meeting in May or in June. She thanked everyone for their assistance.

## **V. Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned at 11:35 a.m.

*This was an electronic meeting with the following remote location:*

Roanoke

Roanoke City Schools

40 Douglass Avenue, NW – Ph 540-853-1393

The Commission had publicized additional electronic meeting sites in Yorktown and Roanoke City at the request of Advisory Group members. However, these members did not call into the meeting.